

Organization = Effectiveness

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Hesiod said that disorder is our worst enemy, and it certainly is when it comes to language learning. We act like pack-rats, bookmarking every website that might be helpful and collecting dozens of downloaded files, but how often do we use these files? I've discovered that I use only a handful of resources over and over again, while many go untouched. Some people like to be disorderly because then they can constantly make exciting discoveries, but a wise man once said, "To know where you can find a thing is the chief part of learning" (Unknown). Unorganized materials means there is a loss of information. You have the resources, but you don't use them. So today we're going to talk about some ideas to make your language learning materials more accessible.

General Organization.

The main idea here is to collect only the good stuff, only the things which have an added value TO YOU. It must help you, otherwise it is just taking up space which could be used for something helpful. So look at your folders and files and remember, EVERY RESOURCE MUST BE HELPFUL FOR YOU. If it isn't, delete it or move it elsewhere.

Generally you should have a folder for each language you are learning. Within that folder, you might have separate folders for audio files, articles and reading material, courses and textbooks, translations, videos, etc. Put the most used files in the parent folder instead of where it "should" go; this makes it take a little less time to find it when you need it. However, you should arrange your files in the most effective way for you.

Compile all your resources into one place. Make a file where you put everything that is helpful for you. Write it down, link to it, rate it with stars, comment on why it's helpful. Delete unused and unhelpful resources.

Websites.

Compile all websites that are helpful for you into a document (or spreadsheet) file. Not every website will be helpful for you. Arrange them by topic so that they are easier to find, and rate them with stars so that later on you will know at a glance which websites are most effective. You could, for example, use a three-star system, with three stars being very helpful and one star being least helpful. If a website doesn't deserve even one star, delete it from your resources or move it to the bottom of your document. Make notes for each site about why you like it and find it helpful.

Native Speakers.

Put all of your contacts into a file also. List the pros and cons of each contact in your file, rate them with stars, and comment on how exactly they can help you. Some people will be able to correct your mistakes; others will be able to make audio recordings for you; still others will be able to help you find other helpful resources or explain the meaning of words and phrases. This

way, when you need something specific, you will know exactly whom you should ask!

Corrections & Explanations.

Collect all of your mistakes in its own file. A table format with three columns works well: one for the date of the correction, one with your original version with the mistake in red, and one with the corrected version with the correction in green. This way you can see where your weaknesses are (which mistakes you are making all the time), and you can quickly find something that you had corrected days, weeks, and months later. Do the same with explanations. Keep all the questions you ask and responses to them in a file. This makes it easier to find than searching through weeks and weeks of emails.

Vocabulary.

It's very important to find out which vocabulary is helpful FOR YOU. It depends on your needs in the target language, of course. If you don't have a vocabulary book, make your own by finding out which topics you talk and hear about the most and write down the words and phrases with their translations in a file. Arrange them by topic so you can find them when you've collected pages and pages of vocabulary.

If you have a vocabulary book, you should know that not every word in it is used often. It's important to figure out which ones are most important, and which you can ignore. One way to do this, though it can take some time, is to arrange the words into chapters and ask native speakers to rate the words for you. Then you can make separate lists for words to learn now, words to learn later, and words you can probably ignore. For difficult words, try creating an image to put in your file next to the term. Also find examples of these words used in sentences in good resources, such as newspapers and magazines, to add to the file.

Conclusion.

All of this organization takes time to achieve, but it took you time to get disorganized, too. Once your files are well organized, you will have a quick way to find the things that are most helpful to you, and you won't be wasting your time wading through resources which aren't good for you and that you don't use. After these files are set up, you can just add to them quickly as you progress; it won't take hardly any time at all. The key is to create an effective system where everything you could need is at your fingertips. Since "Order and simplification are the first steps towards mastery of a subject" (Thomas Mann), let's get organized so that we can learn languages more effectively! :)